Hunger

Extract

A cold breeze gnawed its way through Wolfgang's fur and chewed on his dreams. He stirred for a moment, wrapped in the last threads of fond memories.

He was a cub again. The young wolf bounded through the forest on plump paws, barely keeping his furry head above the dry, yellowed leaves that littered the floor of the wood. The birds, unconcerned with the business of the ground dwellers, sang their songs happily. His mother, some distance ahead, was a lithe shape that melted and shifted between the shadows of the pre-dawn light. Her soft pads were silent and sure. Wolfgang peered through the forest gloom, struggling to see her as she arched her back and pounced with the naturalness of an inward breath. Gone from sight for a second, she emerged once more.

Mother's jaws were closed around one of the little creatures. Soon Wolfgang's belly would be full. Mother dropped the tangled mess of fur and tasty blood at his paws. She nudged the morsel. Wolfgang's mouth warmed, tingled and filled with saliva which beaded and dripped from the folds of his soft jaws. The smell was broad and savoury and he drank it in – relishing it as the invitation to a meal that would make all other meals taste like soil and sawdust. He opened his jaws and clamped down, ready to feel the soft, sweet flesh give way to his pointy teeth. The little creature turned to sand in Wolfgang's mouth and its beautiful scent rushed away into the dark unknown parts of the forest.

Wolfgang awoke with a start. He was an old wolf – weak, wiry and weary. His stomach growled with a ferocity that reminded him of his younger days and the howl he would let echo through the almost endless forest to let the little creatures know that he was king. Those times had passed.

The woods were different now. The furless ones had ripped down the trees, one by one, to build houses and forge roads from one place to another. The little creatures were mostly gone. The men and women who lived in the massacred shells of trees had torn the little ones from their homes and thrown countless quantities on their dinner plates, or taken them away in great numbers on carts that rolled to the towns and markets Wolfgang had heard rumour of. Wolfgang had even watched the humans as they hunted the little ones for sport – an insult to the ancient ways of the forest. Wolfgang, proud and noble, had only taken the small ones as he needed. He was part of the natural order – a pusher of the slowly turning wheel of life and death.

In these times, to be one of the noble creatures – a wolf or a bear – was to live a life of misery. There was no food. Each breath was a struggle. The furless set cruel traps for them in the heart of the forest. Wolfgang had seen brothers and sisters ensnared in the horrible devices and had been powerless to save the poor beasts. But the most hideous sight of all was seeing the monsters wrap themselves in the pelts of his brothers, sisters and cousins. Such a ghastly assault to the senses Wolfgang had not experienced before the hairless ones arrived.

As he always did in the mornings, Wolfgang wandered aimlessly, trying to catch the scent of food on the breeze. He prowled behind the sparse curtain of twisted trunks along the forest edge. As he plodded, he
became increasingly aware of the many dwellings of the furless ones which had replaced the once tall trees. He continued to push on, desperate to catch a scent of prey, even as the sounds of humans rattling within their homes became more apparent. The danger presented by the closeness of the hairless ones caused his lips to pull back over his fangs in a soft snarl – an instinct that pushed sharply through the unrelenting waves of hunger.

A subtle scent gradually filtered its way through the sounds and sights of the forest edge. The faint threads of the scent were new and exciting. The smell pierced the stench of smoke and human sweat. Wolfgang was compelled to push forward – farther into the realm of the hairless ones than he had ever dared. The odour was not a fox; definitely not a fox. It was fresher and, if his nose told him true, infinitely sweeter. Wolfgang pressed himself towards the ground to feel the rhythm of the creature's feet in his chest. It was light on its feet but not as light as a rabbit; it walked with less care and timidity. The smell came closer, gathering like a summer storm, a perfume as thick as a cloud. On days like these when his hunger was maddening, his famished stomach had played tricks on him, but this scent was real. It flowed through him and settled over his eyes in a mist of purple, grey and black and, suddenly, red! Through the haze of hunger and the allure of smell, a small furless human dressed in splendid blood-red appeared before him.

The urge to launch from the shadows and fall upon the little creature was instant and overwhelming. He took a short, sharp breath and reared slightly, ready to pounce. Despite the maddening hunger and the instincts that seized his body and set his muscles on edge, he paused and scanned the surroundings. The small human walked alone on the path just beyond the trees. Wolfgang pressed himself close to the forest floor and stalked closer to the path, eager to find out more about this curious creature in red.

A man's voice suddenly broke the connection between the wolf and the small human. There were heavy footsteps; two humans? Possibly there were more.

"What's that over there?" one of them cried, breaking the silence. The man ran to the tree line with a hatchet in hand.

"It's a horrid wolf!" exclaimed the other.

A hand axe hurtled through the air and ripped through the branches just above Wolfgang's head.

The men rushed upon Wolfgang. It was clear now that there were two of them. Both unloaded bows from their shoulders. One fixed a sharp, pointed arrow to his bowstring as he ran. The one who had thrown the hatchet did the same. Wolfgang bolted from the hunters. One arrow and then another whisked through the air. The terrified wolf ran for his life.

When he reached the safety of the twisted trunks and burrows near his lair and he was sure the humans had ceased their chase, Wolfgang took a moment to curse himself for his carelessness. The filthy scent of the men, their clumsy steps, their bellowing voices, had been so obvious yet they had been overshadowed by the delectable scent of that small human – who continued to stroll along the path into the heart of the forest. Driven by his hunger, Wolfgang doubled back towards the path. He stalked with purpose, eager to pick up the scent once again. He would meet her in the middle of the forest at the fork in the road between the path of needles and the path of pins ...